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SUBJECT: GAZA UPDATE JANUARY 15, 2009, 1300 LOCAL

¶1. (SBU) Summary. IDF troops moved central Gaza City the morning of January 15. Contacts there told ConGenOffs by phone that the city is "burning" and residents are fleeing as the IDF advanced into the city center from three directions. They said the threat to their lives increased and humanitarian conditions are worsening as the fighting continues. Gaza-based contacts report that the IDF is within 500 meters of the al-Shifa hospital, that IDF strikes set fire to the al-Quds Hospital, that a PRCS hospital was hit by Israeli shelling, and that two Palestinians were killed during an attempted fire brigade response. UNRWA reports that its main compound in central Gaza City sustained shelling by the IDF in the morning, causing a major fire consuming its warehouse and workshop. Post received the first report of an AmCit fatality in Gaza and one of our remaining FSNs reported that his house was destroyed and his family was in grave danger. Airstrikes targeted at least 70 targets across the Gaza Strip January 14-15, many of them Hamas-affiliated buildings and smuggling tunnels. Gaza-based medical sources reported a total of 42 deaths January 14-15, bringing the total estimate to 1,054 killed and 4,850 wounded since IDF operations began. End summary.

IDF Operations Enter Gaza City

¶2. (SBU) The IDF pushed further into Gaza City center January 15, backed by helicopters, tanks, and heavy guns. A Gaza-based fuel sector executive told EconOff that the IDF began moving into residential areas from the north and east the evening of January 14. Heavy fighting occurred January 15 in the western neighborhoods of Shaykh Ajleen and Tel al-Hawa, where IDF troops reached positions near the former PA PSO headquarters. Militants employed machine guns, roadside charges, grenades, and suicide bombers against the IDF forces. There was heavy fighting in the southern neighborhoods of the city, where the IDF pushed northward into the Sabra neighborhood, killing at least two militants. Fighting was reported for the first time in the Beach (aka Shati) refugee camp. Israeli Engineering Corps soldiers reportedly destroyed a cache of 20 Katyusha rockets in Gaza City. IAF airstrikes were reported in Tel al-Hawa, Zaytun, and the western neighborhood of Rimal, targeting Hamas-affiliated homes and offices, and at least one mosqueHAMAS HAMAkdlasdf.

Gaza City Residents Fear For Their Lives

¶3. (SBU) Gaza-based sources and press reported that thousands of Gaza City residents fled their homes January 15 as the IDF advanced. The fuel sector executive said the city was full of smoke from burning buildings. He said tanks and other military vehicles were within 500 meters of al-Shifa Hospital, and IDF strikes set fire to the al-Quds Hospital, endangering many patients. ICRC reported that a PRCS hospital was hit by Israeli shelling, and that two Palestinians were killed when fire brigades attempted to respond. Transportation contacts and AmCits in Gaza City told ConGen that a fire at UNRWA's main compound in central Gaza City was "out of control" after several hours of IDF shelling the morning of January

15, and television coverage showed the compound burning. The UN reported three casualties at the compound and said they were trying to remove several full fuel tankers to avoid an explosion. In the meantime, they were encouraging Gazans to seek shelter at the nearby Center for the Blind compound. A Gaza-based contact reported to ConGen that the IDF occupied a floor in his apartment building, near the UNRWA compound. He said he and his family were trapped in the building by heavy street fighting.

¶4. (SBU) American Corner Gaza Director Dr. Awni Karzon told PDOFF that Gaza City has become significantly more dangerous, and residents fear for their lives. He said the IDF is operating within several hundred meters of his home in the North Rimal neighborhood (northwest Gaza City) -- although he has not seen militants in the area -- and that the IDF is moving along major streets leading downtown, which he described as an "occupation." He said the IDF warned al-Hilal Hospital administrators to evacuate the building, and began shelling the area around Islamic University, possibly in advance of occupying it. Dr. Karzon said he doubts residents will take advantage of the daily "humanitarian pause," because they feel unsafe leaving their homes.

¶5. (SBU) One ConGen LES employee and his family, and one USAID LES employee and her family, were located in the Tel al-Hawa neighborhood as heavy fighting took place midday January 15. ConGen, USAID, and Embassy Tel Aviv were coordinating in order to make contact with the employees and direct them to potential safe havens.

¶6. (SBU) ConGen received a phone call the morning of January 15 in which a credible caller reported that Colorado-born AmCit Hassan Abu Shanab, whom ConGen was trying to help evacuate from Gaza, was

JERUSALEM 00000138 002 OF 002

killed in Gaza City January 14. The caller did not provide information on how Abu Shanab died. ConGen has tried to reach the caller and Abu Shanab but has not spoken with either as of 1300 January 15.

Fighting Continues in Northern Gaza

¶7. (SBU) The UN reported that fighting occurred the evening of January 14 in the northern Gaza cities of Bayt Lahiya, Bayt Hanun, and Jabaliya. The Paratroopers 101st Battalion sustained two injuries during clashes in northern Gaza January 14, and the IDF shelled homes in Bayt Lahiya and Jabaliya, killing at least three non-combatants and wounding 12 others.

Conditions Deteriorate in Southern Gaza

¶8. (SBU) Gaza-based sources and press reported that IAF airstrikes targeted an estimated 25 smuggling tunnels along the Rafah border area January 14-15, as well as a house and a mosque in the Barazil border neighborhood. Mayor of Qarara (northeast of Khan Yunis) Eid Sulayman Abdullah told PolOff the evening of January 14 that many have fled from southern Gazan towns to Khan Yunis or UNRWA shelters seeking safety from the fighting. He said shelters are overcrowded and resources, including food, are scarce.

Rockets Continue

¶9. (SBU) Press reported at least two Grad missiles and five Qassam rockets fired into Israel from Gaza January 15 as of 1300 local, causing no casualties but severely damaging one Israeli house and several vehicles. Press reported 20 Grad missiles and Qassam rockets from Gaza landed in Israel January 14, causing no casualties.

Casualties

¶10. (SBU) Gaza-based medical sources told the press that a total of 42 Palestinians died January 14-15. The sources estimated that

1,054 Palestinians have been killed since IDF operations began (including at least 311 children, 93 women, 13 paramedics, and three journalists), and that 4,850 people have required medical treatment for injuries (including at least 1,549 children and 652 women).

¶11. (SBU) Israeli press reported that between eleven and 22 IDF soldiers were lightly injured overnight during incidents in north Gaza.

Humanitarian Pause

¶12. (SBU) A "humanitarian pause" was scheduled from 1100-1500 local January 15, although significant fighting and shelling continued after 1100. ConGenOffs who were on the phone with Gaza contacts 1100-1300 heard explosions in the background. The IDF reported that it will not regularize pause timing in order to prevent militants from using a predictable window for attacks.

Political Developments

¶13. (U) Head of Hamas PLC bloc Salah Bardawil publicly said January 14 that Hamas has presented its comments on the Egyptian proposal and is working to achieve a ceasefire that meets Hamas's demands.

West Bank Reaction and Security

¶14. (SBU) Israeli security forces imposed a curfew for several hours on the village of Huwara, south of Nablus, as they searched several houses. The IDF removed dozens of settlers on January 14 who blocked the road to Qaryut village, south of Nablus. Late January 14, the IDF clashed with protesting Palestinians in al-Jadeera village, southeast of Ramallah, injuring five Palestinians with rubber bullets. Israeli Border Police clashed with Palestinians in Shuafat refugee camp, north of Jerusalem, where four Border Policemen were lightly injured by stones, and a 16-year old Palestinian was beaten and arrested. Several peaceful protests took place across the West Bank January 14. The IDF arrested 24 Palestinians across the West Bank January 14-15.

WALLES